

Shadowed in Geneva by CIA's lost find, Yurchenko

ERNEST B. FURGURSON
CHIEF OF THE SUN'S WASHINGTON BUREAU

WASHINGTON — When Mr. Reagan sat down in Geneva with Mikhail Gorbachev, he was either armed with — or disarmed by — the intelligence our agents have gathered about Soviet capabilities and intentions.

Solid information, wisely evaluated, could be an immense advantage to him. Bad information, perhaps even what intelligence professionals call disinformation, could be disastrous.

Until this month, our side had every reason to believe it was well served by the U.S. intelligence system. At the CIA, high officials were celebrating a coup, the acquisition of a key KGB defector.

Then, with the president's summit trip two weeks away, Vitaly Yurchenko, ace of spies, decided to go back to Russia. Washington was thrown into confusion.

The officials who had been chortling over how valuable Mr. Yurchenko was started saying he really never amounted to much. They scoffed at suggestions that he might have been sent here intentionally to create dissension as the president approached Geneva.

Whether he came originally for that purpose or not, he succeeded.

Of course, any Yurchenko specifics that were factored into summit preparations were factored out again. But it is impossible to sift out the uncertainty, the finger-pointing and backbiting that his case has stirred in Washington.

The row is reminiscent of a decade ago, when congressional hearings exposed some of the Central Intelligence Agency's darkest secrets. Soon afterward, a Democratic administration dismissed many of the CIA's clandestine operatives.

Those attacks demoralized the agency. Conservatives blamed liberal Democrats in Congress for seriously damaging U.S. intelligence capability, and have held that grudge ever since.

When Mr. Reagan was elected, he appointed hard-nosed William J. Casey to rebuild the agency. Mr. Casey rehired many of the veteran specialists fired by Jimmy Carter's CIA director, Adm. Stansfield Turner. Morale was on the rise until the Yurchenko case.

Now the agency is under fire from Congress again, but with differ-

ences:

This time the Republican administration and its Republican intelligence chief are getting it from a Republican-controlled Senate — and this time the complaints are not about an excess of zeal, but a shortage of skill.

Of course, Democrats have been heard from, too, but the head-to-head argument has been between Mr. Casey and Minnesota's David Durenberger, who chairs the Select Committee on Intelligence.

The senator lunched with reporters a week ago and said he was drafting a letter to ask Mr. Casey to spell out how Mr. Yurchenko was handled, what was learned from the episode and who is accountable for the whole mess.

But he went beyond the embarrassment of the moment, asserting that the CIA lacked a sense of direction and had no long-range guidance relating to the Soviet Union. He said there was no sense of an ongoing national intelligence strategy.

Mr. Durenberger said his committee probably would recommend that the president's national security adviser, rather than the CIA director, be the chief link between intelligence and policy. His opinion that Mr. Casey was "a professional . . . a darn good guy in that job" got lost in the story.

Not surprisingly, Mr. Casey fired back, issuing a letter that assailed the Senate chairman for offhandedly disparaging the agency. He main-

tained that congressional oversight had gone awry, saying it repeatedly compromised sensitive intelligence information.

There it stood, with others chiming in from the sidelines, until this week. Then came the formidable Jesse Helms of North Carolina, who is not a member of the intelligence committee but who has strong opinions on matters that concern communism.

Mr. Helms anticipated the flap over U.S. intelligence operations, but with a characteristic twist. He wrote a five-page letter to the president last month, citing examples to charge that the CIA has consistently misread Soviet intentions and underestimated Soviet capabilities. When that letter was leaked this week, a new question was introduced into the public debate: Does CIA analysis have a pro-Soviet bias?

We might assume that of all the agencies of government, the CIA would be the least pro-Soviet. But not these days. The agency itself reportedly has put a task force to work investigating the Helms thesis.

No charge is too preposterous to be taken seriously in this atmosphere. Republicans are looking under other Republicans' beds, anti-communists are questioning the biases of other anti-communists, nobody seems sure whom to believe.

In Geneva, they are talking. On Dzerzhinsky Square in Moscow, they are laughing.